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Intelligence Experts See No Link Among Arrests

By **STEPHEN ENGELBERG**

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 25 — Administration officials say the spate of espionage arrests — four people in five days — is largely coincidence and reflects increased awareness of security problems, not a sudden decision to round up all Americans known to be spying for foreign powers.

Stephen S. Trott, the head of the Justice Department's criminal division, said in an interview that the timing was dictated by circumstances.

"These things just kind of all emerged," he said. "People are just sort of stunned by the number of cases going on and they're looking for more than is there. We move when we're ready to move."

There have been at least 10 people arrested on espionage charges this year, a total that has already exceeded any other year in history, according to Justice Department records.

An intelligence source familiar with the four arrests said "there is no thread that ties them together."

Change Under Carter

Mr. Trott said that this year's succession of arrests arose from a change in policy by the Carter Administration, which decided to prosecute spy suspects instead of dropping the charges or using suspects as double agents.

Coupled with this, Mr. Trott said, were increased resources for the counterintelligence program at the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the passage of legislation that gave the Justice Department added authority for wiretapping.

According to the Justice Department, the number of wiretapping applications approved by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court has more than doubled, from 319 in 1980 to 635 in 1985. Taps authorized by the court were used against John A. Walker Jr., a retired Navy enlisted man, and similar taps may have played a role in the arrest of Larry Wu-Tai Chin, a retired employee of the Central Intelligence Agency whose telephone conversations are described in an F.B.I. affidavit.

Mr. Trott said another recent law helping prosecutors deal with secret material behind closed doors had also made it easier to bring espionage charges. Previously, prosecutors were vulnerable when criminal defendants sought to avoid a trial by threatening to expose reams of secrets in court.

Intelligence agencies, according to Carter Administration officials, were initially nervous about espionage prosecutions, because they feared the release of secret information and embarrassing episodes.

"Now, you've got an intelligence

community that is very comfortable about what we're doing," Mr. Trott said. "They don't think that more stuff is going to be dragged out in court."

One factor that may have encouraged the F.B.I. to move quickly in the cases was the criticism the bureau received for failing to detain Edward Lee Howard, a former Central Intelligence officer who is believed to have fled the country. According to law enforcement officials, the F.B.I. did not have sufficient evidence to arrest Mr. Howard, who had been interviewed by bureau agents but not charged.

As part of its broad examination of intelligence issues, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has said it is looking into why Mr. Howard was able to evade authorities. Law-enforcement officials have said the surveillance on him was "loose" and not intended to hold him. No arrest warrant had been issued when he escaped.

According to court documents, Mr. Chin had been under suspicion since 1983. Ronald W. Pelton, the National Security Agency employee arrested early today, had admitted espionage to F.B.I. agents in an interview on Sunday. Jonathan Jay Pollard and his wife were taken in shortly after Mr. Pollard, under surveillance by the F.B.I., drove onto the grounds of the Israeli Embassy here on Thursday.

'I Would Say It's Both'

An Administration official, asked about the large number of espionage arrests, replied: "Is it because we're looking harder or because there are more? I would say it's both."

He noted that the number of Soviet bloc intelligence officers had significantly increased since President Reagan took office. He said it was not surprising that officials in Government agencies had been recruited as spies by the 400 intelligence services that operate worldwide.

"What do you think these guys do every day?" the official said. "Presumably these guys are not sitting watching American television; they're out doing something with somebody. It stands to reason there are more spies than we know about."

The White House today applauded the recent arrests. "This Administration from the outset has set priority on rooting out cases of espionage," Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said. "It is our goal to have more appropriations, more people and an aggressive posture to recognize the threat to our national security posed by the activity of hostile intelligence. I think you see it paying off."